

**U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management
Royal Gorge Field Office
3028 E. Main Street
Canon City, CO 81212**

CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION

NUMBER: DOI-BLM-CO-200-2013-019 CX

CASEFILE/PROJECT NUMBER (optional):

PROJECT NAME: Stone Cabin Thinning Project

PLANNING UNIT: Arkansas River Subregion #1

LEGAL DESCRIPTION: T.12 S., R. 79 W., Sections 8 & 9, 6th PM

APPLICANT: BLM

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION: The project area is located approximately 14 miles north of Buena Vista, Colorado along the east side of Highway 24 and west of the Arkansas River. The Proposed Action is to mechanically treat less than 70 acres of mixed conifer forests using conventional logging equipment through a stewardship contract or timber sale. The objectives of this proposal are to improve forest health by reducing tree densities, salvage dead or dying trees, reduce canopy fuels therefore reducing the risk of a canopy wildfire, increase forest age class diversity of desired species, improve the vigor of the aspen and cottonwoods, improve wildlife habitat, and protect water quality. In 2008, approximately 60 acres was thinned utilizing stewardship contracting on BLM lands on the west side of Highway 24. This project area has seen vast improvements to the understory plant vigor; numerous aspen sprouts have developed where lodgepole pine existed prior to thinning and minimal blow-down occurred in the reserve trees.

The treatment unit has a wide variety of tree species. The conifer species found on this site are spruce, ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, limber pine and lodgepole pine. The forest is characterized as second growth mixed conifer with small pockets of aspen. Trees were harvested from the area during the settlement of the nearby towns around the time minerals were discovered and the railroad was built. Field reconnaissance of the old stumps found in the area reveals that mainly large ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir dominated this site. Today the site is dominated by lodgepole pine. The Mountain Pine Beetle (MPB) activity in this area has slowed over the past couple of summers. The lack of moisture during the winter of 2012-2013 is highly likely to exacerbate the MPB population in the area. Current forest densities in the treatment area are ideal for a bark beetle epidemic or catastrophic wildfire.

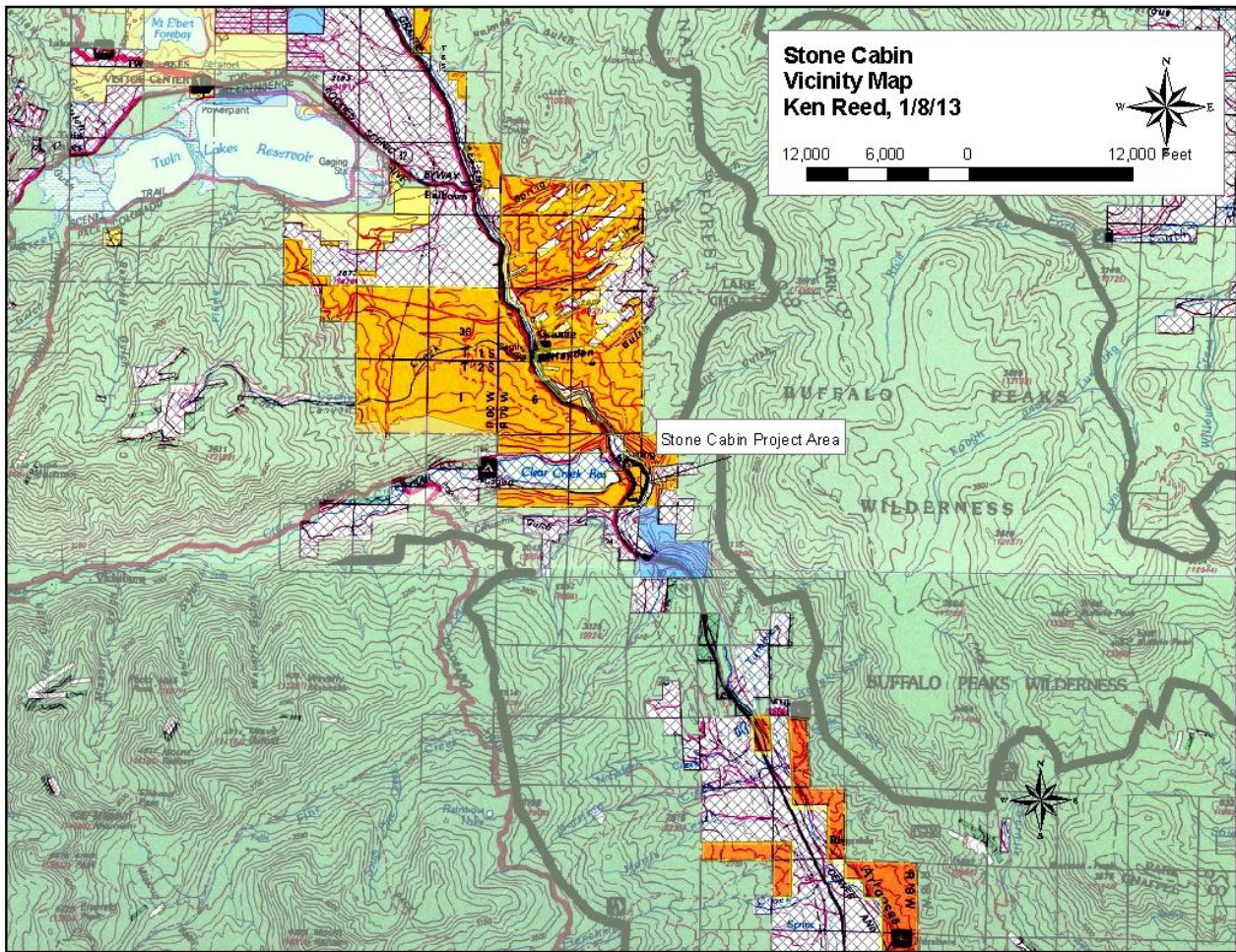
The treatment would involve restoration thinning which would favor the most fire adapted species including Douglas-fir, aspen, and ponderosa pine. These species would be retained over lodgepole pine and spruce. Trees infected with dwarf mistletoe would be removed regardless of species. Dwarf mistletoe is a parasitic plant that takes moisture and nutrients from the tree causing premature death. The large healthy trees would be reserved while maintaining a representation of all species and sizes. Conifers encroaching into the existing pockets of aspen, cottonwoods and willows would be removed to reduce competition. The work would be completed with chainsaws, skidders or tractors, log trucks and loaders on slopes less than 35%.

Access to the unit will be the Stone Cabin BLM access off Highway 24 into the project area. This road will be improved to facilitate the forest product removal. Any temporary roads or skid trails will be closed to future motorized access once the project is completed.

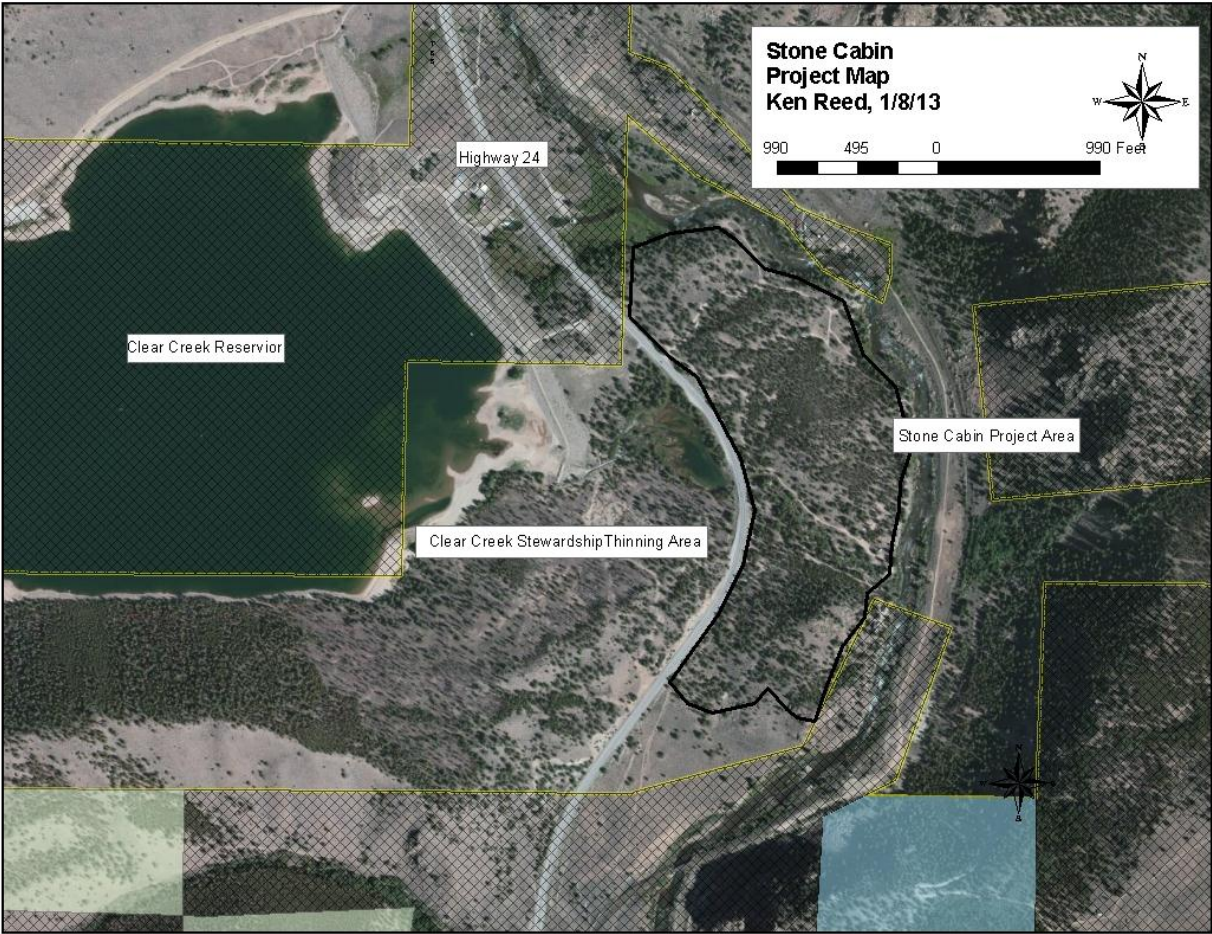
Slash from the thinning shall be piled, chipped or removed as biomass. Piles shall not exceed 15 feet in diameter by 10 feet in height where they can be burned effectively in suitable weather and not damage the reserve trees. Machine piles shall be constructed to minimize the incorporation of dirt into the piles. Piles may be allowed to cure for a season to minimize emissions from burning green material. If chipping the slash is the selected treatment then chips shall not exceed 8 inches in depth.

This project area is currently unallotted for cattle grazing but maybe grazed in the future, therefore there should be no impacts to any grazing operation. All known improvements will be protected or repaired if damaged, including but not limited to camping sites, fences, gates, watering facilities, property corners, etc.

PROJECT VICINITY MAP



PROJECT MAP



PLAN CONFORMANCE REVIEW:

Name of Plan: Royal Gorge Resource Management Plan

Date Approved: 05/13/96

Decision Number: 1-1, 1-14, 1-15

Decision Language: Vegetation management will be as follows: vegetation will be managed to accomplish other BLM initiatives i.e., riparian, wildlife, etc.; management of forest lands will be for enhancement of other values. Productive forested lands will be managed for sustained yield. A portion of the forested lands will be available for intensive management.

CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION REVIEW: This proposed action is listed as a Categorical Exclusion in DOI Departmental Manual Part 516 Chapter 11.9 (C.7). None of the following exceptions in 516 DM 2, Appendix 2, apply.

Exclusion Criteria	YES	NO
1. Have significant impacts on public health or safety.		X
2. Have significant impacts on such natural resources and unique geographic characteristics as historic or cultural resources; park, recreation, or refuge lands; wilderness areas; lands with wilderness characteristics; wild or scenic rivers; national natural landmarks; sole or principal drinking water aquifers; prime farmlands; wetlands; floodplains; national monuments; migratory birds; and other ecologically significant or critical areas.		X
3. Have highly controversial environmental effects or involve unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources.		X
4. Have highly uncertain and potentially significant environmental effects or involve unique or unknown environmental risks.		X
5. Establish a precedent for future action or represent a decision in principle about future actions with potentially significant environmental effects.		X
6. Have a direct relationship to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant environmental effects.		X
7. Have significant impacts on properties listed, or eligible for listing, on the National Register of Historic Places as determined by either the bureau or office.		X
8. Have significant impacts on species listed, or proposed to be listed, on the List of Endangered or Threatened Species, or have significant impacts on designated Critical Habitat for these species.		X
9. Violate a Federal law, or a State, local or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment.		X
10. Have a disproportionately high and adverse effect on low income or		X

minority populations.		
11. Limit access to and ceremonial use of Indian sacred sites on Federal lands by Indian religious practitioners or significantly adversely affect the physical integrity of such sacred sites.		X
12. Contribute to the introduction, continued existence, or spread of noxious weeds or non-native invasive species known to occur in the area or actions that may promote the introduction, growth, or expansion of the range of such species.		X

INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM REVIEW			
NAME	TITLE	AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY	Initials/date
Matt Rustand	Wildlife Biologist	Terrestrial Wildlife, T&E, Migratory Birds	MR, 1/30/2013
Jeff Williams	Range Management Spec.	Range, Vegetation, Farmland	NA
Chris Cloninger	Range Management Spec.	Range, Vegetation, Farmland	NA
John Lamman	Range Management Spec.	Weeds	JL, 02/12/2013
Dave Gilbert	Fisheries Biologist	Aquatic Wildlife, Riparian/Wetlands	DG, 2/4/13
Stephanie Carter	Geologist	Minerals, Paleontology, Waste Hazardous or Solid	SSC, 1/17/13
Melissa Smeins	Geologist	Minerals, Paleontology	-----
John Smeins	Hydrologist	Hydrology, Water Quality/Rights, Soils	JS, 1/17/13
Ty Webb	Prescribed Fire Specialist	Air Quality	TW, 1/16/2013
Jeff Covington	Cadastral Surveyor	Cadastral Survey	JC, 1/16/2013
Kalem Lenard	Outdoor Recreation Planner	Recreation, Wilderness, LWCs, Visual, ACEC, W&S Rivers,	-----
John Nahomenuk	River Manager	Recreation, Wilderness, LWCs, Visual, ACEC, W&S Rivers	JN 1/24/13
Ken Reed	Forester	Forestry	1/7/2013
Martin Weimer	NEPA Coordinator	Environmental Justice, Noise, SocioEconomics	mw, 1/16/13
Monica Weimer	Archaeologist	Cultural, Native American	-----
Erin Watkins	Archaeologist	Cultural, Native American	MDT, 2/12/13
Vera Matthews	Realty Specialist	Realty	VM, 2/21/2013
Steve Craddock	Realty Specialist	Realty	NA
Steve Cunningham	Law Enforcement Ranger	Law Enforcement	NA

REMARKS:

Cadastral: The survey monuments in the project area need to be protected before work begins. The corners that need to be found and protected are the West $\frac{1}{4}$ corner of section 8 (1970's survey) and corner 5 of mineral survey 62 in section 9 (1980's survey). The GCDB reliability for these corners in this area is ± 10 ft.

Cultural Resources: One Isolated Find (IF) was located during the cultural resources inventory [Report CR-RG-13-069 (P)]. However, the IF does not meet the criteria for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places. Therefore, the proposed undertaking will not affect historic properties.

Native American Religious Concerns: No possible traditional cultural properties were located during the cultural resources inventory (see above). There is no other known evidence that suggests the project area holds special significance for Native Americans.

Wastes, hazardous or solid: If the project involves oil or fuel usage, transfer or storage, an adequate spill kit and shovels are required to be onsite during project implementation. The project proponent will be responsible for adhering to all applicable local, State and Federal regulations in the event of a spill, which includes following the proper notification procedures in BLM's Spill Contingency Plan.

Minerals: The federal minerals in the proposed project area are open to mineral location, therefore requiring coordination between surface uses as applicable. If there are unpatented mining claims that are active in the proposed project location, any associated claim markers encountered during project implementation cannot be disturbed as they are private property. As of January 2013, the entire project area consists of active placer claims.

Recreation: The project area is located within the boundary of the Arkansas Headwaters Recreation Area (AHRA), Cooperative Management Agreement (CMA) area. Coordination with AHRA staff regarding proposed road work and public land boundary locations is necessary prior to any work commencing.

Threatened and Endangered Species: There are no records of any federally listed or BLM sensitive species within or near the project area. The Proposed Action will not result in impacts to TES species.

Migratory Birds: To be in compliance with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) and the Memorandum of Understanding between BLM and USFWS required by Executive Order 13186, BLM must avoid actions, where possible, that result in a "take" of migratory birds. Pursuant to BLM Instruction Memorandum 2008-050, to reduce impacts to Birds of Conservation Concern (BCC), no habitat disturbance (removal of vegetation such as timber, brush, or grass) is allowed during the periods of May 15 - July 15, during the breeding and brood rearing season for most Colorado migratory birds. An exception to this timing limitation will be granted if nesting surveys conducted no more than one week prior to surface-disturbing activities indicate no

nesting within 30 meters (100 feet) of the area to be disturbed. Surveys shall be conducted by a qualified breeding bird surveyor between sunrise and 10:00 a.m. under favorable conditions.

If vegetation was cleared prior to May 15, this provision does not apply to ongoing construction or completion activities that are initiated prior to May 15 and continue into the 60-day period.

Ospreys have nested near the project area in the past. If ospreys are observed in the project area, work cannot be done during their nesting season, April 1 to August 31. In addition, a ¼ mile buffer around the nest will be established where no human activity is allowed. BLM staff will survey the project area for ospreys before work begins.

Lands and Realty: The authorizations in the project area include:

COC-36832 issued to Colorado Department of Transportation under Federal Aid Highway (Sec 317), highway right of way.

COC-36849 issued to Sangre De Cristo Electric Association, for a FLPMA electric power line.

COC-38702 issued to Qwest Corporation for a FLPMA telephone line.

COC-67068 issued to an individual for a FLPMA road right of way.

COC-0-094000 issued to Union Pacific Railroad for a special acts railroad 24 Stat 0402.

COC-0-122222 issued to Aurora Colorado Springs Joint Water Authority, City of Aurora, Colorado Springs utilities, 43 USC 959, Home-stake water project for The Aurora pump station.
COL-0480 Reservoir and Ditch

The area is also withdrawn to the SO 6/3/1946 Wdl Gunnison Ark Recl project. The representative at the BOR should be contacted prior to starting the project to coordinate. The current contact is Tara Piper, at the Loveland office, the number is 970-962-4381. The office information is: Bureau of Reclamation Eastern Colorado Area Office 11056 West County Road 18E, Loveland CO 80537-9711. 970-667-4410 fax: 970-663-3212.

Tara Piper was contacted at the end of February and determined that the project would not impacts to any of their water infrastructure after reviewing the project.

COMPLIANCE PLAN (optional):

NAME OF PREPARER: Ken Reed

SUPERVISORY REVIEW: Melissa K.S. Garcia

NAME OF ENVIRONMENTAL COORDINATOR: /s/ Martin Weimer

DATE: 3/17/14

DECISION AND RATIONALE: I have reviewed this Categorical Exclusion and have decided to implement the Proposed Action.

This action is listed in the Department Manual as an action that may be categorically excluded. I have evaluated the action relative to the 10 criteria listed above and have determined that it does not represent an exception and is, therefore, categorically excluded from further environmental analysis.

SIGNATURE OF AUTHORIZED OFFICIAL:

/s/Keith E. Berger
Keith E. Berger, Field Manager

DATE SIGNED: 3/26/14